

START & RUN A LANDSCAPING BUSINESS

Joel LaRusic

Self-Counsel Press

(a division of)

International Self-Counsel Press Ltd.

USA Canada

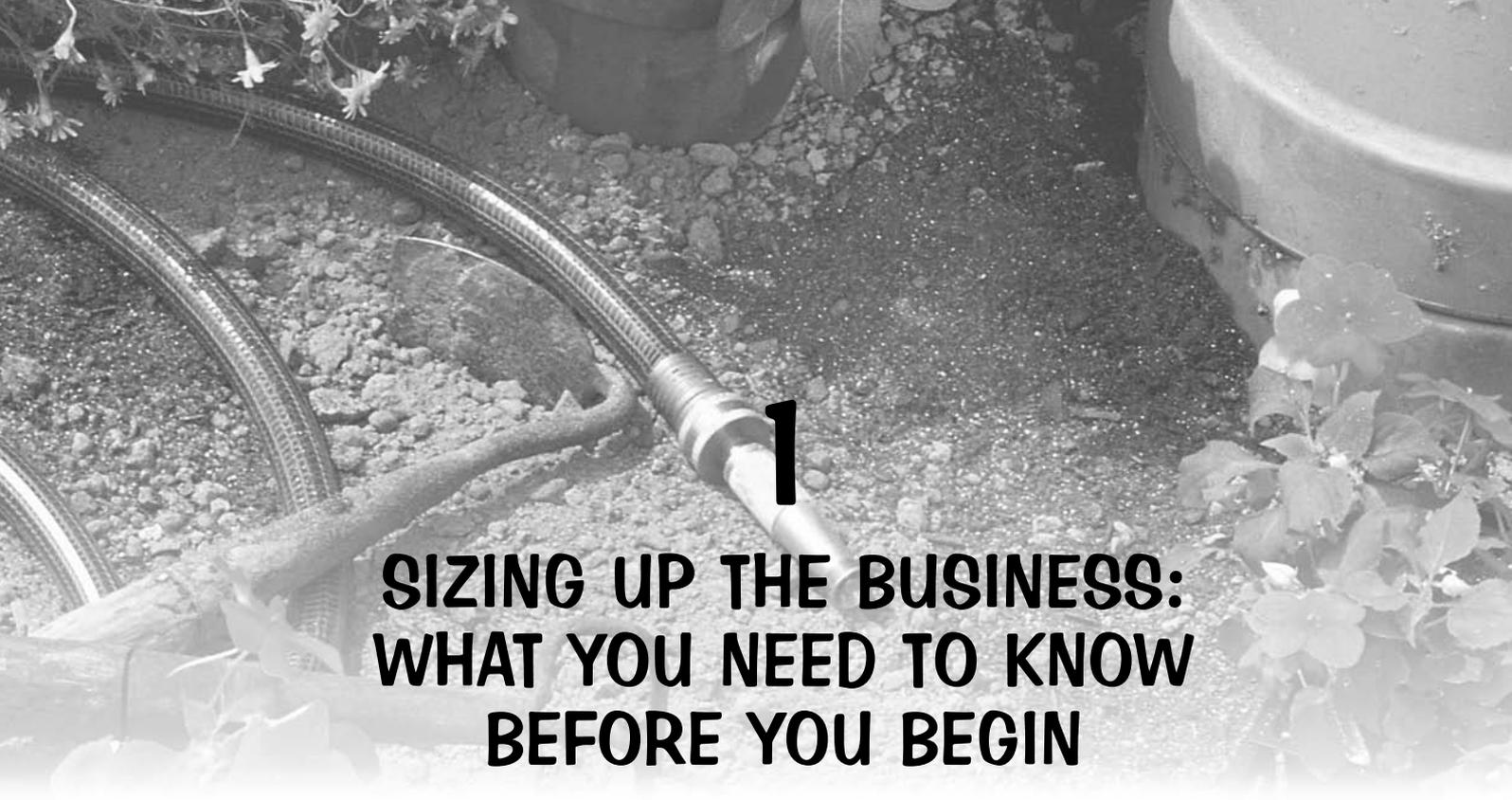
CONTENTS

PREFACE	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
PART 1: STARTING YOUR BUSINESS	1
1 SIZING UP THE BUSINESS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU BEGIN	3
1. Is This Business for You?	3
2. Your Personal Improvement Plan	3
3. Resources for Further Help	6
2 MAKING YOUR BUSINESS LEGAL	13
1. Choosing a Business Name	13
2. Choosing a Business Structure	14
3. Licenses and Permits	15
4. Bylaws and Zoning	16
5. Insurance	16
6. Using Professional Advisors	17
3 MONEY MATTERS	19
1. Financing Options	19
2. Your Business Plan	20
4 CHOOSING THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT FOR THE JOB	27
1. Your Vehicle	28
2. Trailer Options	29
3. Choosing the Right Lawn Mower	30

4.	Power Equipment	33
5.	Hand Tools	37
6.	Ladders	38
7.	Snowblowers	39
8.	Equipment Maintenance	39
PART 2: RUNNING YOUR BUSINESS		43
5	SETTING UP SHOP: YOUR HOME OFFICE	45
1.	The Home Office: Rewards and Challenges	45
2.	Where to Put Your Office	46
3.	The Most Essential Item: Your Business Computer	47
4.	Other Office Essentials	52
5.	Setting Up a Shop	54
6.	Setting Up Your Truck and Trailer	54
6	MARKETING YOUR BUSINESS	57
1.	Developing Your Marketing Plan	57
2.	Your Core Statement	62
3.	Specific Marketing Strategies	62
4.	Your Marketing Calendar	72
7	THE IMPORTANCE OF RECORD KEEPING	75
1.	Three Principles of Record Keeping	75
2.	Bookkeeping Basics	77
3.	Using Business Forms	79
4.	Computerized Bookkeeping	88
5.	Using a Cash System	89
8	BUILDING YOUR TEAM: HIRING AND TRAINING STAFF	93
1.	Using Subcontractors	93
2.	The Joy of Employees	94
3.	Where to Find Good Staff	94
4.	Interviewing Tips	95
5.	Training Matters	99
6.	Managing Your Team	100
7.	Dealing with Problems	100
8.	The Paperwork	102
9	THE WORKFLOW FROM FIRST CONTACT TO QUOTE	107
1.	First Contact: The Phone Call	107
2.	The Follow-Up Checklist	109
3.	The On-Site Visit	109
4.	Pricing	111
5.	Using a Lawn and Garden Maintenance Quotation Worksheet	115

6.	The Quotation Sheet	117
7.	Presenting Your Quotation	120
8.	The Follow-Up	123
10	THE WORKFLOW FROM ACCEPTANCE TO ROUTING	125
1.	Accepting the Job	125
2.	Upselling	131
3.	Scheduling	134
4.	Routing	137
5.	Using Job Equipment Checklists	140
11	THE WORKFLOW FROM JOB COMPLETION TO JOB COSTING	141
1.	Invoicing	141
2.	Getting Paid	142
3.	End-of-Day Procedures	143
4.	Month-End Procedures	146
5.	Quality Assurance	146
6.	Job Costing	148
7.	Costing Other Services	153
8.	Annual Procedures	154
	PART 3: THE SERVICES YOU OFFER	159
12	THE REGULAR MAINTENANCE VISIT	161
1.	Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Cutting Lawns	161
2.	Edging	169
3.	Maintaining Beds	171
4.	The Cleanup: Using Your Blower	175
5.	Leaving the Site	177
13	LAWN SPECIALTIES	179
1.	Power Raking	179
2.	Core Aeration	181
3.	Top-Dressing and Overseeding	183
4.	Lawn Renovations	184
5.	Lawn Rejuvenations	186
14	THE ART OF FERTILIZING	187
1.	Why Fertilize?	187
2.	A Chemistry Lesson	187
3.	Choosing a Fertilizer	191
4.	How and When to Apply Fertilizer	194
5.	Calibrating Your Spreader	196
6.	Fertilizing Other Plants	197
7.	Some Final Tips	197

15 OTHER SERVICES	201
1. Soil Analysis	201
2. Soil Toppings	202
3. Pruning and Trimming	203
4. Off-Season Work	207
CHECKLIST	
1 Customer Follow-Up	111
SAMPLES	
1 Marketing Flyer for Fall Cleanup	67
2 Marketing Flyer Targeted to Specific Area	68
3 Direct Mail Ad	70
4 Marketing Calendar	73
5 Chart of Accounts	80
6 Comparative Profit and Loss Statement	85
7 Balance Sheet	87
8 Employment Acceptance Letter	98
9 Employment Termination Letter	104
10 Monthly Referral Tracking Sheet	110
11 Quotation Sheet	118
12 Introductory Letter	122
13 Welcome Letter	127
14 Contractual Letter	132
15 Customer Job Times Record	145
16 Property Quality Assessment	147
17 Job Costing	150
18 Equipment Usage	152
19 Customer Follow-Up for New Season	156
20 Recommended Extras Form	157
21 Jobsite Visit Notice	178
WORKSHEETS	
1 Skills Self-Assessment	4
2 My Action Plan	7
3 Targeting Your Market	61
4 Employee Status Change Form	103
5 Lawn and Garden Maintenance Quotation	116
6 New Client Questionnaire	128



1

SIZING UP THE BUSINESS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. IS THIS BUSINESS FOR YOU?

Gardening is many people's favorite pastime. They love to putter in the garden, snipping back a few daisies, turning over the soil in the bed here and there, cutting the lawn at a nice leisurely pace. Who wouldn't want to do that for a living?

Well, this business is a lot of things, but puttering is not one of them! In my ten years in the business, I don't think I have puttered even once. Instead, I'm usually on the go. It is a job that requires a lot of energy and a lot of motivation, and before you invest too much time and money in starting your own business, you should take a step back and assess whether it is right for you.

Worksheet 1 will help you identify your strengths and weaknesses for starting a landscaping business. You can use the results to determine if your expectations are

realistic and if there are areas you need to work on to ensure your success. Take the time to complete Worksheet 1 now.

2. YOUR PERSONAL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

It's important to assess yourself as accurately as possible. If your answer to any questions in the first six sections of Worksheet 1 was "no," you should consider carefully if you are cut out to run your own landscaping business. The traits identified in those sections are *required*, not suggested, for success. If you don't possess several of these traits, it's better to find out now, before you have spent money on a truck and equipment and advertised for your first customers. If you answered "no" to just one or two questions in these sections, and if you really think you can work on those points, then you should carry on with the exercise.

WORKSHEET 1 SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT

Answer all of the following questions by checking “Yes” if you feel the answer is mostly yes and by checking “No” if the answer is mostly no. Take a good, introspective look at yourself and answer as honestly as you can. If you plan to go into business with a partner, make a copy of the assessment and ask him or her to complete it as well so that you can evaluate how the two of you may complement each other.

		Yes	No
Work ethic	You enjoy hard work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You work conscientiously?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You prefer to do a thorough job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You maintain high standards?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical strength	You are in good physical health?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You can lift 60 pounds?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You can walk all day?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You don't mind getting your hands dirty?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Plant knowledge	You love plants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You love to learn about plants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You want to learn a lot of plant names?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You like to have the best-looking lawn?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Motivation	You are a self-starter?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You work well without a boss?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You get out of bed easily?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You want to run a lawn care company?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
People skills	You enjoy meeting new people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You can manage people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You tolerate different religions and races?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You can handle difficult people?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

WORKSHEET 1 — Continued

		Yes	No
Positive attitude	You have an easy smile?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You usually see the cup as being half full?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Setbacks are challenges to you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You prefer a happy work environment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Integrity	You are honest?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You stand by your word?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You treat people fairly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You will go back to fix a job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication	You think before you speak?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You speak clearly?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You are a good listener?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You can write good letters?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organization	You prefer to be organized?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You like record keeping and bookkeeping?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You can use a daytimer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You like to make and use checklists?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Diplomacy	You seldom lose your temper?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You can accept constructive criticism?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You prefer to make peace?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You know how to say “no”?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creativity	You like to create?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You try to think of new ways to do things?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You like working with colors?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	You like to be creative in marketing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you answered “no” to questions in the final five sections, you have identified some areas in which you need to improve. You can start by using Worksheet 2 to make your own action plan based on the answers to your self-assessment. Place a check mark in the column beside each of the questions you answered “no” to on Worksheet 1. Then read the comments, which explain why that particular characteristic is important. In the last column, fill in your action plan for improvement. Again, your candid answers will help you in the long run, so be honest with yourself.

When considering your action plan, think of what you might do to improve that particular skill. For example, if you answered “no” to the question “You can lift 60 pounds?” you might write, “Work out in gym until I am able to lift 60 pounds into my truck.” Or if you aren’t confident about writing letters, you might write, “Read books on writing successful business letters. Practice.”

Make it a personal goal to follow through on *all* of your action items. Make these goals important to you because they will help you succeed in your business.

3. RESOURCES FOR FURTHER HELP

As you go through your self-assessment and think about how you can improve on those areas in which you may need help, remember that you are not alone. There are thousands of other people in the landscaping business. Some, like you, are starting out. Others are long-term veterans. Most are willing to share their experience with you if you only ask.

Landscaping associations give you the chance to network with other businesspeople. Doing so benefits everyone, as you will learn from other people’s experiences and they can learn from yours. The industry as a whole is bettered. Associations can also be your voice in government and keep you abreast of laws and bylaws in your area that may affect your business.

Such associations often offer certification programs, and I recommend that you complete such a program. If and when you have staff, support them in becoming certified too. If you are certified, you can display the certification logo on your advertising material, proving that you have met certain criteria and possess certain competencies.

You usually have to pay an annual fee to become a member of an association or similar organization. This money is well spent. As a member, you will be offered direct savings such as fuel discounts. Also, your membership may win you customers. Belonging to these organizations will not make your phone ring off the hook, but if you are competing head-to-head with a nonmember, you are more likely to come out on top.

- ✦ In the United States, contact the Professional Landcare Network (PLANET). Their website is www.landcarenetwork.org.
- ✦ In Canada, contact the Canadian Nursery Landscape Association (CNLA). Their website is www.canadanursery.com. Each province has a chapter.

There may be other organizations and associations in your area, such as the local chamber of commerce, that can be helpful and provide good networking opportunities.

Ask if the member list is available so you can review how many people are involved and what they do for a living. This may help you determine if the cost and time investment are worth the potential new business you might secure.

Another good source of information is the Internet. If you do not have a computer and an Internet connection, I would highly recommend getting both. There is a universe of information at your fingertips when you are online. Sometimes you must sort through a

lot of fluff to get some quality information, but once you have found some good sites, you can visit them again and again.

For a start, check out my own website, www.MowBoy.com. It provides a bulletin-board-style forum so you can talk to other lawn care operators and ask questions. There are many tips on horticulture and business, as well as a number of links to other quality sites. Finally, I also offer business consulting services, in case you need a little help getting your business up and growing.

WORKSHEET 2 MY ACTION PLAN

Statement	Comments	Answered No?	My plan to improve
Work ethic			
You enjoy hard work?	If you feel good after a hard day's work, you're on the right path. If you are afraid of a little sweat, this may not be the job for you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
You work conscientiously?	Conscientious means diligent, thorough, consistent in application or attention, persistent. This is a key to your success.	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
You prefer to do a thorough job?	If you always like to be thorough, then this is a perfect job for you. The details matter a great deal in this business.	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
You maintain high standards?	Sloppiness does not win bids. You must set stringent standards for yourself and your employees from the beginning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

WORKSHEET 2 — Continued

Statement	Comments	Answered No?	My plan to improve
Physical strength			
You are in good physical health?	This is a very active lifestyle. Are you up to it? If you are not sure, try working for someone else for a year to find out.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You can lift 60 pounds?	If you work smart, you can avoid situations that require strenuous lifting, but sometimes you won't be able to get away from it.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You can walk all day?	You need endurance. You may be walking miles a day with either a mower or a weed whacker in front of you.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You don't mind getting your hands dirty?	Not just your hands, either. Your arms, legs, and face may also get dirty. If that idea bothers you, consider carefully whether you want to take on this career.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Plant knowledge			
You love plants?	You need to enjoy the plants you take care of to do your best work. Do you like to stop and smell the roses? Do you sometimes stand in awe of the marvels of creation?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You love to learn about plants?	What you learn will help you in your business. People will take you seriously when they know you are an expert.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You want to learn a lot of plant names?	Telling your customers you are going to prune "that shrub" will not impress them. You need to know the names of the most common plants, at least (Latin names too).	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You like to have the best-looking lawn?	There is a certain pride that goes with having (or looking after) the nicest lawns on the block. If you feel this, you will do well.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

WORKSHEET 2 — Continued

Statement	Comments	Answered No?	My plan to improve
Motivation			
You are a self-starter?	The fact that you have come this far suggests that you meet this requirement . . . and a requirement it is. Success will evade you without it.	_____	_____
You work well without a boss?	You may enjoy having no one to tell you what to do next or how to handle a crisis, but on the other hand, <i>you</i> will need to know what to do next or how to handle a crisis.	_____	_____
You get out of bed easily?	If you need someone to push you out of bed each morning, this is something you'll want to work on.	_____	_____
You want to run a lawn care company?	If you don't have the basic desire, you won't have what it takes to keep going.	_____	_____
People skills			
You enjoy meeting new people?	You don't have to love everyone you meet, but you really should enjoy meeting and working with new people. It will make your job more enjoyable.	_____	_____
You can manage people?	Being able to manage people is a valuable skill, but it is something that can be learned.	_____	_____
You tolerate different religions and races?	You will be dealing with folks of all races, creeds, and religions. Be tolerant. Prejudice will hamper your efforts to serve people.	_____	_____
You can handle difficult people?	There will be times when difficult people cause you grief. Will you be able to handle it professionally?	_____	_____

WORKSHEET 2 — Continued

Statement	Comments	Answered No?	My plan to improve
Positive attitude			
You have an easy smile?	Most folks expect a gardener to have a sunny disposition. You don't have to beam like the sun all day, but at least greet people with a smile and a wave or a nod.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You usually see the cup as being half full?	You must be able to look on the bright side of things. Problems will come up. There will be bad days. Can you endure?	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Setbacks are challenges to you?	It helps if you can break a problem down into small, manageable chunks, turn obstacles into challenges, and convert weaknesses to opportunities for improvement.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You prefer a happy work environment?	Not too many people would answer "no" to this question. If you aren't happy in your job, you're in the wrong place!	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Integrity			
You are honest?	Dealing with people in a dishonest way will catch up with you and ruin your reputation. The opposite is true too; word of an honest company offering honest deals gets around.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You stand by your word?	If you promise something, you must stick to it, even if it costs you. It will cost you a lot more in the long run if you come across as inconsistent.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You treat people fairly?	Deep down, you should want to treat people with fairness all the time. You may encounter so-called opportunities to take advantage of people and make money. Don't fall prey to them!	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

WORKSHEET 2 — Continued

Statement	Comments	Answered No?	My plan to improve
You will go back to fix a job?	If the job is not done right, you'll need to go back and fix it. It will lower your profit, but it will probably make your customer happy. Happy clients are your future.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Communication			
You think before you speak?	Once the words are out of your mouth, you cannot take them back. A good business owner will think before he or she speaks.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You speak clearly?	Your command of English should be very good. If English is your second language, work on improving your skills so you can communicate clearly with your clients.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You are a good listener?	The most important part of a conversation is the listening. Listen carefully to your customers to understand their needs.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You can write good letters?	You will need to write a lot of letters in this business, but this is a skill that can be learned.		<hr/> <hr/>
Organization			
You prefer to be organized?	The more organized you are, the easier your business life will be. Keeping on top of your paperwork and client needs will improve your profit margin.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You like record keeping and bookkeeping?	Bookkeeping is an important part of being self-employed. Not all the business is taken care of outdoors. There are plenty of books and software packages to help you — or, if you can afford it, you can hire someone.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You can use a daytimer?	Daytimers are excellent tools for running your small business. Learn how to use one if you do not know how already.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

WORKSHEET 2 — Continued

Statement	Comments	Answered No?	My plan to improve
You like to make and use checklists?	Checklists are excellent ways to develop systems and procedures that bring consistency and stability to your business. Use them!		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Diplomacy			
You seldom lose your temper?	Are you a hothead? There's no room for anger when working for customers.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You can accept constructive criticism?	Don't take criticism personally. Learn from it. Thank people for their feedback and try to take their advice to better your business.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You prefer to make peace?	Gardeners have a reputation as peace-loving people. An easygoing nature works well in this business.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You know how to say "no"?	While you may be peace-loving, that does not mean you are a pushover. Sometimes you will need to say "no."		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
Creativity			
You like to create?	Creativity is a huge advantage in this business. You can use creativity to help make gardens more beautiful, to design a marketing flyer, and to solve problems.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You try to think of new ways to do things?	If you are always thinking of better, faster, more efficient ways of doing things, your business will be an exciting one.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You like working with colors?	You're not alone if you aren't sure how well you work with colors. You can learn the basics from any garden design book.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
You like to be creative in marketing?	Creative marketing will help your business tremendously. Read the chapter on marketing carefully and then read more books. Be creative, be exciting.		<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>